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The perceived impact on academics' teaching practice of engaging with a higher education institution's CPD scheme*

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ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to identify via questionnaire (42) and interview (6) academic staff perceptions of the impact on their practice of engagement with an institutional Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Scheme aligned to the UK PSF and leading to HEA Fellowship. This paper focuses on three key themes in relation to teaching and learning practice development: Reward and recognition for teaching and learning quality; change in teaching practice and enhanced engagement with professional development; and action planning and CPD. The findings indicate that engagement with an institutional HEA accredited PSF scheme leads to positive change in a scheme applicant's perception of their practice and supports wider academic development of colleagues through mentorship and leadership.

Context and background

The HE sector is increasingly focused on teaching and learning practice, and demonstrating effective teaching practice has become a priority for many institutions. In 2015, in the UK, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) formally linked teaching enhancement to academic staff engagement with Continued Professional Development (CPD), stating that gaining a recognised teaching qualification (RTQ) demonstrated a commitment to personal and professional development that would 'support the enhancement of teaching practice and the student experience' (HEFCE, 2015). The National Student Survey (HEFCE, 2015) and associated league tables contain sections linked to teaching quality and the institutional return for the HE Statistics Agency (HESA) now includes the percentage of academic staff with a RTQ. From 2015, this data was publicly available and its potential influence as a marketing tool and a quality measure has led to many universities encouraging their teachers gain an RTQ.

The increasing sector emphasis on teaching practice was articulated explicitly within the Green Paper 'Fulfilling our Potential' (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills [BIS], 2015) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) that emerged from it (BIS, 2016). The desire to achieve higher institutional TEF awards is likely to require universities to demonstrate a



high reputation for teaching and learning practice. However, the definition of this within TEF is unclear and factors that are known to be good indicators of teaching excellence are not even mentioned. Ashwin (2016), states that 'it is bizarre that we have purported measures of teaching excellence that tell us nothing about the expertise of those who teach or about how successfully students gain access to knowledge'. Although TEF (BIS, 2016) does not overtly include teaching qualifications as a formal metric, it is still likely that the provision of an effective CPD Scheme, the numbers of staff engaging with it and the numbers of staff with an RTQ will form part of the supporting evidence provided by TEF Institutional Submissions.

The UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in HE (UK PSF) (Higher Education Academy [HEA], 2011) is an internationally recognised framework that 'facilitates individuals and institutions in gaining formal recognition for quality enhanced approaches to teaching and supporting learning' (HEA, 2011, p. 2). The UK PSF is structured around four descriptors (D1-D4) that outline the relevant characteristics for four defined categories of Higher Education (HE) teaching and learning practice: Associate Fellow (AFHEA); Fellow (FHEA); Senior Fellow (SFHEA); and Principal Fellow (PFHEA). The number of institutional professional development schemes, mapped to the UK PSF and accredited by the HEA, has risen rapidly within the UK and at the time of writing 149 UK university CPD schemes have HEA accreditation (Higher Education Academy [HEA], 2017). The HEA is also working internationally to support the development of schemes aligned to the UK PSF, with strategic partners in Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. The number of international schemes aligned to the UK PSF is growing. Currently the HEA has 85,260 Fellows of which 2000 are from non-UK institutions (HEA, 2017). Although HEA Fellowship is not a teaching qualification, HESA (2016/17) included all categories of HEA Fellowship in their list of acceptable RTQs and view it as evidence of teaching expertise.

There is some evidence that gaining a formal teaching qualification, such as a Post-Graduate Certificate in HE, results in a measurable improvement in the quality of teaching (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). Parsons, Hill, Holland, and Willis (2012), in a large scale literature review of the impact of HE teaching development programmes on teaching practice found 'a growing and diverse evidence base, with some positive impacts on practice' (p. 39). However, opinion within the sector as to whether engagement with the UK PSF is also an effective way of enhancing the quality of learning and teaching or just a tick box activity is mixed, with evidence as to how engagement with CPD schemes aligned to the UK PSF impacts on teaching practice being somewhat limited. The use of HEA Fellowship as a proxy for excellent teaching is not proven and requires further investigation.

Peat (2014) expresses concern that engagement with the UK PSF may not be the best way to enhance teaching and learning practice. She comments that the 'issue of the credibility and the value of the UK PSF and an HEA Fellowship in the eyes of many colleagues can be problematic' (Peat, 2014, p. 17). She suggests that recognition against the UK PSF risks being a tick box activity in order to meet a political agenda and could become 'a tokenistic exercise, engaged in purely as a result of institutional pressure and league table priorities' (p. 18).

In an HEA sponsored study, Turner et al. (2013) surveyed a wide group of teaching staff and completed eight institutional case studies. They concluded that engagement with the UK PSF had a significant impact on the UK HE sector particularly at an institutional level and that the UK PSF 'had a profound impact on how [institutions] undertake and think about learning, teaching and assessment' (Turner et al., 2013, p. 8). However, the study



acknowledges that many individual HE staff are unaware of the framework with 43% of the 1201 respondents having no knowledge of the UK PSF. Those who had appeared to have participated in an institutional CPD programme aligned to the UK PSF, when asked if engagement with the UK PSF had influenced their practice, 54% ($n = 378$) of those who had engaged, suggested it had somewhat or greatly changed their approach to learning, teaching and assessment. Unfortunately, the study provides no detail of what these changes in practice were. Conversely, some respondents expressed points of concern with 'some direct and in some cases passionate criticism of the framework and the HEA as a whole, including scepticism about its quality and credibility' (Turner et al., 2013, p. 26). The number and nature of these comments is not reported. The study findings suggest a split in sector opinion as to whether engagement with the UK PSF benefits learning and teaching practice.

Based on a survey of 800 Senior and Principal Fellows and ten subsequent interviews, Eccles (2016) suggests a positive impact on practice. Respondents ($n = 268$) reported that engaging with the fellowship application process encouraged reflective practice, which then resulted in perceived improvements in their teaching practice, and that of others. Successful applicants also felt that the achievement of Senior or Principal Fellowship recognised their education practice achievements, made them better mentors, and set a good example to colleagues.

Spowart, Turner, Shenton, and Kneale (2015) reported the experiences of 19 established academics who gained HEA recognition through an institutional HEA accredited CPD scheme. They identified key themes linked to the motivation of academics to engage with the scheme: Awareness of the broader political agenda to enhance teaching; local recognition of good practice; and championing HEA recognition and accreditation. They did not consider any impact on teaching and learning practice but suggest that 'continued critical interrogation of the process of accreditation is essential to ensure that engaging in the process adds value in terms of enhancing teaching quality' (Spowart et al., 2015, p. 11).

Current studies therefore provide mixed evidence as to whether there is a positive impact on the teaching practice of academics through engagement with institutional CPD schemes aligned to the UK PSF. More investigation is needed before we can draw any firm conclusions on the impact of these schemes on HE teachers' future teaching practice.

Aim and objectives

This paper aims to evaluate the perceived impact of engagement with one UK HEA accredited institutional PSF scheme on participants' professional development and professional practice. The specific objectives of the study relevant to this paper are to explore:

- (1) The reasons applicants engaged or deferred engagement with the scheme,
- (2) The impact of engaging with the scheme on the applicant's professional development and practice,
- (3) Future decisions and actions in relation to the schemes development.

Method

The CPD scheme described here was accredited by the HEA in 2013 and consists of two parallel routes: A taught programme route for less experienced teaching staff, and a



recognition route, enabling more experienced teachers to apply for any of the four categories of HEA Fellowship via a reflective 'portfolio'. This study focuses on the recognition route.

A mixed methods approach which included an initial survey via questionnaire to establish key themes, followed by semi-structured interviews to expand the initial findings was carried out. As suggested by Chatterji (2005) this evaluation study will also inform future decisions and actions of the leaders and stakeholders of the CPD Scheme. This method also allows patterns and relationships within the data to be revealed more clearly (Chatterji, 2005). The project gained full ethical approval and all participants gave full informed consent and were assured anonymity and confidentiality.

Project stages

The project consisted of two stages:

Stage 1: Online Questionnaires distributed to all staff within the sample population (Group 1A and 1B).

Academic staff who had registered their intention to submit an application between September 2013 and May 2014 were approached to participate in this stage of the study. This sample was then sub-divided into two subgroups:

1A: All Applicants who submitted applications. ($n = 47$).

1B: All Applicants who deferred submission of their application on more than two occasions ($n = 29$). *Stage 2:* Subjects that completed the Stage One questionnaire were also invited to volunteer to participate in the Stage Two interviews. From these volunteers six were purposively selected to participate in Stage Two of the study.

Stage 1: Questionnaire

Questionnaires were distributed online to enable responses from as many applicants as possible. Two questionnaires were designed, focussed particularly on study objective 1 and 2, one for members of group 1A (those who submitted) and one for members of group 1B (those who deferred). The main questions were open questions asking the respondents why they had engaged with the scheme, why they had deferred, what barriers there were to engaging and if there had been any resultant changes to their practice.

The completion rates for the questionnaires ranged from 59 to 74% and can be seen in Table 1.

The questionnaire responses were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Robson, 2011). The thematic coding process described by Robson (2011) was adapted for this purpose. Robson (2011) describes thematic networks

Table 1. Questionnaire sample and response rate.

Questionnaire group	Sample	Completions	
		n	(%)
1a. Successful applications	47	35	74
1b. Deferred applications	29	17	59



as the ‘fitting together of the themes into one or more maps or networks’ (p. 483), enabling detailed exploration of all the data in order to find relevant patterns and trends). Two initial thematic networks were identified, one of these being ‘teaching and learning practice development’. This paper focuses specifically on the further analysis of this network.

Stage 2: Interviews

The aim of the interviews was to gain more depth of commentary linked to the overall study aim to evaluate the impact of engagement with an institutional PSF scheme on participants’ professional development and professional practice. The initial teaching and learning practice development thematic network, derived from the questionnaires, was analysed and topics for further exploration in the stage two interviews were identified.

Suitable volunteers were purposively selected to be interviewed. Selection aimed to provide a group of applicants from as wide a range of faculties as possible, covering a range of categories of Fellowship. No Associate Fellows (AHEA) volunteered to participate in the Stage Two interviews. There are six faculties within the institution (coded A–F) and five were represented in the interviews (Table 2).

Prior to the interview, each interviewee’s Stage One questionnaire responses were reviewed to identify the nature and extent of their engagement with the initial teaching and learning development thematic network. Individualised semi-structured interview questions relating to the sub-themes identified within the initial thematic network were then developed.

Results

Following the interviews, the initial thematic network was expanded and adapted to incorporate the additional data. The majority of themes were unchanged but more detail was provided. Some themes were modified or focussed as more clarity was gained and a few new themes emerged. These are identified in Table 3 (see key). This resulted in the final thematic network illustrated in Table 3.

Analysis

The following analysis sets out findings relating to the three principal themes, and associated sub-themes, emerging from the data.

Table 2. Characteristics of applicant interviewees.

Applicant	Role	Faculty	HEA category achieved
A1	Academic leader	F	SFHEA
A2	Senior learning and teaching fellow	A	PFHEA
A3	Senior lecturer	A	FHEA
A4	Faculty student support officer	E	FHEA
A5	Principal lecturer	C	SFHEA
A6	Head of department	B	SFHEA



Table 3. Thematic network: Teaching and learning practice development.

1. Reward and recognition for teaching & learning quality		Applicant No of responses	2. Change in practice related to teaching and learning	Applicant No of responses	3. A tool to encourage professional development	Applicant No of responses
Individual	Recognition of personal achievement as an academic	A1–3	Engagement with reflective practice*	A1–2 A2–2 A3–1 A4–2 A5–7 A6–4	Encouraged future engagement with CPD activities	A4–4
		A2–1				
		A4–4 A6–2				
		A1–1				
	Formal recognition for a teaching and learning role	A2–2	Enhancement of future teaching and learning practice*	A1–1 A3–1 A4–2 A5–5 A6–2	Developmental feedback from teaching and learning experts	A2–1 A3–3
		A3–3 A6–2				
		A1–1				
	Boosts confidence/validates practice		Encouraged engagement with scholarship of teaching and learning*	A2–1 A3–7 A4–2 A5–2 A6–4	Stimulates PDP**	A2–5 A4–2 A5–3 A6–2
		A2–1				
		A3–3 A6–1				
Institutional	PSF provides accepted set of standards/structure	A2–1	Willingness to support/advise colleagues**	A1–4 A2–1 A3–3 A4–1 A5–1		
		A4–2				
	'Quality Mark' for teaching and learning	A4–1 A5–2	Focus on good practice**	A5–1		

Notes: A = Applicant (A1 = Applicant 1).

*Modified following stage 2; **New theme identified following stage 2.

Reward and recognition for teaching & learning quality

The concept of reward and recognition for effective teaching and learning practice emerged as the clear driver for engagement with the scheme. This theme contained three sub-themes.

Recognition for the institution

Applicants 1, 5, and 6 also had managerial responsibilities that influenced their response to this topic. They recognised that a higher percentage of their staff holding HEA Fellowship could be a good marketing tool. They saw Fellowship as a quality mark for teaching and learning and felt that publicising a high percentage of Fellowship could benefit a department's student recruitment. At the time of the interviews, HEFCE had set a sector benchmark for RTQs and each institution had a specific target for improvements in this data in the next year. In the study institution, it was acknowledged that these targets resulted in an increased managerial focus on improving the RTQ numbers and this resulted in increased engagement with the Institutional CPD scheme. Applicant 6 was concerned that this drive to increase numbers was likely to encourage 'rubber stamping' rather than enhancing real engagement with CPD and development of academic teaching practice.



Spowart et al. (2015) confirmed that an institutional priority to increase numbers of HEA accredited staff was an unavoidable driver for many applicants. Their findings also suggested that marketisation and the trend of creating targets for the level of RTQ's was becoming the norm and was a key driver for many colleagues' engagement with the UK PSF. This could potentially devalue the potential professional development benefits. The introduction of the TEF (BiS (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills), 2015) is also likely to make raising RTQ numbers even more of a priority for institutions. Scheme leaders will need to ensure that the focus on practice development is not lost in the inevitable drive to increase numbers.

Individual recognition

In Stage One of the study the most common response as to why applicants had completed the application process was the wish to gain formal recognition for their teaching and learning (71%). Spowart et al. (2015) had similar findings suggesting that recognition 'raised the individuals' profiles within the community' (p. 8). The interview findings confirmed that this issue was a driver for all the applicants. Further analysis identified four sub themes. These were the wish to gain:

- Personal recognition of their achievement as a teacher (A1).
- Formal recognition for their lead role in teaching and learning within the faculty (A1, 2, 3, 5, 6).
- Recognition of teaching and learning activities for staff in a non-traditional teaching role e.g. researchers and support staff (A1, 4).
- Improved self-esteem as a teaching and learning practitioner/legitimacy to engage in teaching and learning debate (A2, 3).

Bradley (2014) supported this viewpoint stating that 'recognition of the contribution I was making to the student experience' was one of the key impacts for her in achieving Senior Fellowship. Other studies confirm that successful applicants see recognition as being an important factor in raising their status and credibility as teachers (Eccles, 2016; Spowart et al., 2015). Turner et al. (2013) found that 47% of the 95 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that responded in their study found that engagement with the UK PSF led to a change in practice resulting from enhanced reward and recognition. It is unclear whether the remaining 53% of institutions had no change in practice, or that it was just not reported as being related to reward and recognition.

Boosting confidence/validating good practice

Alongside personal recognition, applicants described an associated boost in their confidence as a teacher following recognition that their current teaching practice was appropriate. Within Stage One, nineteen respondents had reported that recognition of personal achievement as a teacher was an important benefit of receiving Fellowship. Their comments often focussed on how the requirement within the application process to reflect on and acknowledge achievement within their practice had enabled them to recognise previously unrecognised achievements as a teacher. During the interviews, it was reported that engagement with the scheme had:



- Created an opportunity to reflect on what was good rather than the common focus on what was poor (A1).
- Created an opportunity to recognise what the applicant had actually achieved (A2, 3, 5).
- Endorsed/validated good practice (A3, 6).

Eccles (2016) confirms similar findings with successful applicants describing an increase in professional credibility and personal reflection that had enhanced their personal confidence and self-awareness as an HE teacher.

A number of applicants commented that improved confidence and validation of practice also positively influenced their future practice and the practice of others in that it:

- Enabled them to identify good practice and transfer this to new situations (A1).
- Increased their willingness to suggest practice development options to colleagues (A2).
- Was seen as a licence to go out and try different things (A1, 3).
- Provided confidence to debate good practice and teaching and learning development with colleagues (A3).
- Provided confidence to apply for and gain an institutional research scholarship and to engage with ongoing teaching and learning research (A3).

Spowart et al. (2015) also found that successful applicants continued to develop their future practice and engage in activities such as championing HEA recognition and role modelling good practice (p. 8).

There is evidence here that the change in a successful applicant's perception of their confidence as a teacher had a beneficial impact on their future teaching practice. The changes in practice articulated in the following sections support this conclusion.

Change in practice related to teaching and learning

Without exception, all interviewees described perceived positive changes in their future practice following engagement with the scheme. The changes in practice fell into three main sub-themes:

- Engagement with reflective practice
- Engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning
- Willingness to support and advise colleagues.

Engagement with reflective practice

The development of the applicants' ability and willingness to engage in reflective practice and the consequential impact of this on their practice was a common theme. Within Stage One a number of applicants had suggested that engaging with the process of reflective practice resulted in changes in their practice. These findings were further investigated within Stage Two and the changes in practice were reinforced. Engagement with reflective practice was described as:

- Enhancing the useful process of 'going backward to go forwards' (A4).
- Encouraging engagement with a process that enables you to 'unpick key principles, outcomes and lessons learned ... it gives you a useful way at looking at things ... the whole reflective process made me evaluate things' (A2).



- Encouragement to move from a process of reflection in action, to a deeper and more effective reflection on action (Schön, 1983) (A2, 3, 4, 5, 6); thus enabling staff to step back and make more 'thought through and justified changes to their practice' (A5).

Eccles (2016) also confirmed in her survey of SFHEA/PFHEAs that the development of reflective practice was a key response to engaging with the UK PSF via a Senior or Principal Fellow application.

Engagement with the scholarship of teaching and learning

Five interviewees reported that completing their application encouraged them to engage more with the scholarship underpinning good practice in teaching and learning and that this had subsequently influenced their future practice. The specific benefits of engagement with scholarship were described as:

- A mechanism to identify different and new ways of practice and teaching (A3, 6).
- The creation of a practice of automatically accessing literature and using it as a resource when developing new practice (A3, 5).
- Encouragement to engage with the new language and processes described in current literature, and think more about future practice (A3, 4, 6).

Engagement with the scheme had stimulated a change in the future academic practice of most interviewees, particularly in relation to changing their thought processes and incorporating reflective practice and applying scholarship to their future practice. Brew and Ginns (2008) found that an engagement with scholarship resulted in an improved student experience.

Willingness to support and advise colleagues

All applicants also reported that following the application process they felt in a better position to mentor colleagues and support them in their practice development. This should result in a spread of the previously described benefits of the scheme across departmental teams.

A tool to encourage professional development

The final theme within this thematic network focussed on the impact that engagement with the scheme had on an applicant's future professional development.

Stimulates PDP and action planning.

Within the stage 1 responses many applicants ($n = 25$) reported an intention to continue to use the learning from the application process to develop their future practice. This finding was investigated further within the interviews and a number of personal development planning activities were identified including:

- An opportunity for academic staff to review their personal development and consider future PDP activities (A2, 4, 5, 6).
- An engagement with professional dialogue had stimulated the development of new ideas for practice development (A2).



- Keeping a personal reflective diary as part of the application process had continued and become an integral part of day-to-day practice. (A4).
- The creation of a departmental framework to support and give a focus to PDP conversations within the PDR process (A6).
- Encouragement to engage with formal and informal institutional CPD opportunities (A3).
- Encouragement to apply for and gain SFHEA following feedback from the assessment panel (A3).

Turner et al. (2013) also suggested that schemes can provide a 'common language and a point of focus within and across disciplines' (p. 7) for staff development. They also found that 82% of the institutions that responded reported that engagement with the UK PSF had positively influenced institutional processes and procedures for staff professional development.

It is apparent that engagement with the scheme had encouraged applicants to think about their future academic practice development. This is something that applicants suggest will continue as they move forwards and will influence their future engagement with teaching practice development activities.

Developmental feedback from teaching and learning experts

The final sub-theme was the benefit some applicants (A2, 3) described resulting from the receipt of detailed developmental feedback on their application from the panel. The panel members were viewed by the applicants as being teaching and learning experts and their feedback was felt to be a powerful acknowledgement of the validity of their current practice and a tool to support future practice development.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have evidenced that engagement with an institutional CPD scheme aligned to the UK PSF can lead to both institutional and personal recognition for an applicant's teaching and learning activities. Individually, this recognition and validation of current practice commonly resulted in a boost in the confidence of teachers in relation to their practice. Alongside this the stimulation to continue engaging with reflective practice and the scholarship underpinning teaching and learning appears to also have a positive influence on the teacher's future teaching practice. Other authors support this positive relationship between a teacher's engagement with the scholarship of teaching and an improved student experience (Brew & Ginns, 2008; Parsons et al., 2012).

Colleagues who have received validation of their current practice also appear more confident in engaging in dialogue with colleagues around what constitutes good teaching and learning practice. They appeared more willing to lead and mentor academic colleagues in relation to teaching and learning personal development.

The study identified that a positive change in practice occurred following an academic's engagement with an institutional accredited CPD scheme aligned with the UK PSF. This change also resulted in the practitioner supporting wider departmental change through an increased engagement with mentorship and leadership of colleagues' teaching and learning practice.



It is difficult to assess with absolute certainty any consequential impact of this practice change on the student experience and any influence is likely to be indirect. This will be the focus of a future study. However, it is reasonable to suggest that participation in such a scheme can encourage a change in the way a teacher thinks about their practice and these changes in practice can subsequently have a positive influence on the student experience.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Kathryn Ann Botham is an Academic Developer and Principal HEA Fellow. She is the scheme leader for the MMU PSF Scheme and is also an External Assessor for two large Higher Education Institutions schemes as well as being an HEA Accreditor. She is involved in personal and cross institutional research related to the evaluation of Institutional PSF Schemes and has previous publications focussed on effective support for disabled students in practice and inclusive curriculum development and delivery.

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